II Preservation on Nantucket

Preservation: National Standards, Local Application

Since July, 1975, all of Nantucket Island has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Within that designation are two *core* historic districts, the town of Nantucket and the village of Siasconset. With its rich whaling history, splendid architectural artifacts, and community conscience, Nantucket is unique in America as a *living* tapestry of 300 years of American heritage, particularly in its built environment. But the towns, small settlements, streetscapes, waterfront, even its land, associated as it is with 19th century sheep farming, American Indian encampments or shore-based fishing, all contribute to an overall, and complete, historical package, held intact over time by virtue of its remote island setting.

Difficulty getting to Nantucket has provided it with a curious form of time-tested insurance against many mainland community problems: urban renewal and its naive destruction of historic buildings and landmarks, for one; demolition and additions without heed of historicity or aesthetics, for another; or the form and fabric of a given street or neighborhood, for a third. Town and city planning problems such as these have never been issues on Nantucket, largely because of its island setting and the necessity of 'importing' building materials.

From the moment it was rediscovered as a haven for tourists at the turn of the century, Nantucket was a preservation movement in progress. It continues, with only additional fervor and professionalism, to this day. Because of this, when a building is acquired or a plan for new construction is made, the builder/buyer is automatically a part of a preservation continuum. Here, where the island is both viable community and dynamic museum, there is no such thing as building *without* Nantucket in mind.

Preservation, as it is held on Nantucket, is more than just bolstering up old buildings and filing for historic home plaques. It is a philosophy of much broader scope. More than simply preserving the artifacts of a bygone era, it is a dedication to enriching rather than diminishing that heritage, largely because it is very much a functioning community. Compatible building is just the beginning. Nantucket is a cultural collective—from its historic architecture to the indigenous flora of its moors, from its past shaped by Pacific sperm whaling and the China trade to its present shaped equally by

bay scalloping, tourism and the second home industry.

Unlike Williamsburg, Sturbridge Village or other such communities, Nantucket is not a *recovered* glimpse of historic American life. Nor is it a mere glimpse at all. Perhaps making it unique in the nation is Nantucket's vibrancy as a living, evolving community of unparalleled historic value. Here, it is possible to live it, not just gaze in over velvet ropes. This privilege, however, bears with it the weight of great responsibility, hence why everything from design to trim color is subject to approval, why preservation on Nantucket is, simply, a way of life.

Preservation policy on Nantucket is grounded in a policy of minimal intervention. Intervention goes beyond the obvious of avoiding architectural irresponsibility, be it in style or in detail. It touches on the broader issues of respecting the physical, cultural and metaphysical fabric of the island as a whole, in keeping with its designation of landmark *in toto*.

At the heart of new building as well as preserving or restoring the old is an understanding of the character-defining properties of a given structure, including its siting, its historic associations, its aesthetic relationship with its neighbors, byways, even its vegetation, in effect, its overall *context.*

To begin with, though, the first job—and not always the easiest—when an existing structure requires or merits attention, is to determine what exactly a building represents, in context, as well as more specifically, in exact period. Not surprisingly, on Nantucket many houses as well as other structures have evolved through several period incarnations, reflecting everything from changing social styles or individual tastes to solutions to manmade or natural disasters. Understanding the component parts initiates the process of preservation; deciding which to stress or recover is a decision which must rest on degree and compatibility.

For the lay investigator as well as the professional, there are two ready sources for evaluating the architectural history of a given building on Nantucket—the Historic District Commission's Architectural and Cultural Resources Survey and the Nantucket Historical Association's consultation and evaluation service. The Survey, available in the Commission's office, documents through photographs, visual assessment and historical research more than 90 percent of the island's sites and structures. Dates of construction, architectural styles and types, physical condition, unique characteristics and historical information are outlined for each structure. Criteria determined by standards set by the National Trust for Historic Places are employed to evaluate whether each is individually significant, contributing or non-contributing to the Nantucket Historic District. The NHA's consultation and evaluation service provides an individualized examination and assessment of a given property as requested by its owner.

The History of Preservation Nantucket takes its lead in preservation policy and procedure from national precedents. Just how preservation evolved as a movement in this country, then, is instructive for Nantucket's conforming as well as special preservation considerations.

Although the first documented preservation activity in the U.S. was the restoration of a public building—the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island—in 1827-28, preservation in its earliest days was the domain of the

house museum. The product of national patriotic fervor, private determination to save and preserve sites associated with historic figures motivated the first days of preservation. Houses occupied by historic figures—George Washington, Paul Revere, etc. —were converted into museums largely through the efforts of individuals who organized private groups to save specific historic shrines. The first of these, in 1850, was Hasbrouck House in Newburgh, N.Y., one of Washington's headquarters. Mount Vernon, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, and the Paul Revere House followed, as did many, many others.

It was not until the 20th century, however, that historic preservation stretched its wings to include buildings of regional and local import as well as of cultural historic value. Charleston, S.C., spearheaded a 'neighborhood' preservation sensibility when, in 1931, it established the nation's first historic district, an area of the old city known as The Battery. Unsightly modern additions (a gas station was a major catalyst) had begun to impinge on the area's integrity. The town fathers of Charleston waged a winning battle to save the neighborhood and all the vernacular structures within it from comparable insult or destruction. In so doing, they set the stage for other communities, like Nantucket, to declare neighborhoods or communities preservation sanctuaries.

Only just prior to Charleston's notable forethought came the opening efforts of the nation's most ambitious preservation project to date—the reinstating of an entire 18th century town, colonial Williamsburg. Funded by John D. Rockefeller and envisioned by a local rector, W.A.R. Goodwin, Williamsburg came to represent every aspect of preservation—total reconstruction, rehabilitation, restoration and adaptive use. A clear inspiration for Nantucket, Williamsburg differs in that it was conceived and rendered as a museum-like preservation of a community, attracting visitors as any museum might. It is a model of a historic community while Nantucket is a living historic community.

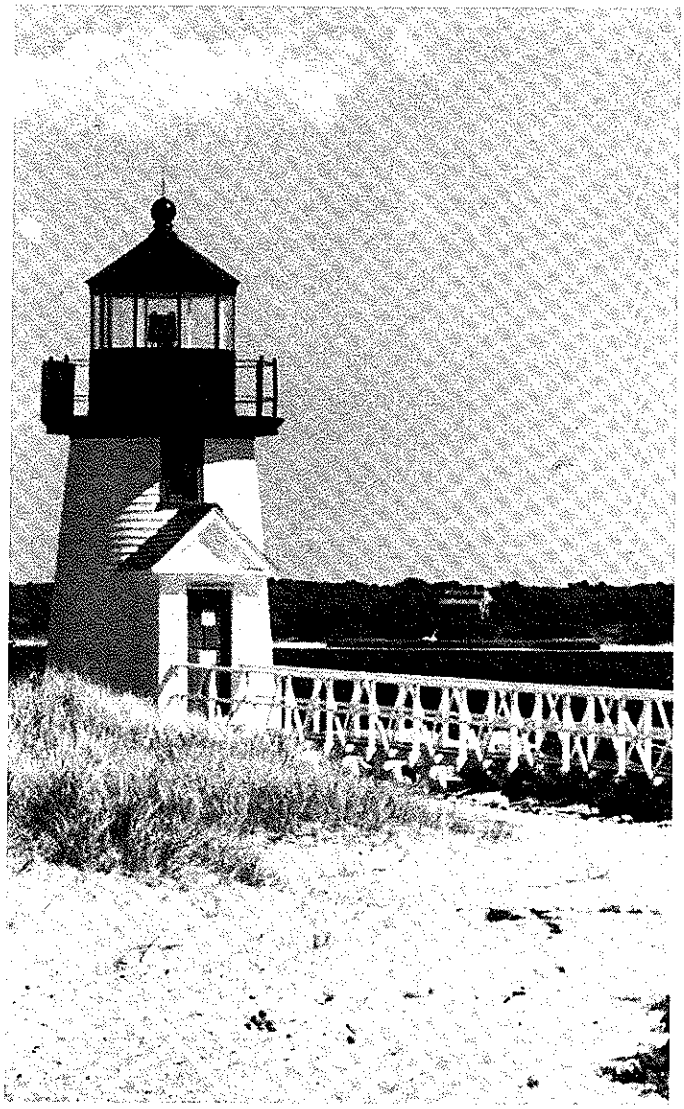

Figure 3. Brant Point Lighthouse.

When the National Trust for Historic Preservation was established in 1949, the country found its first preservation leadership on a national level. Here was a group to set and implement standards that could serve as examples at the local level. Their stewardship of individual properties laid the groundwork for preservation policy-making

culled from their own trial and error. In 1966, the Trust acquired legislative muscle when the National Historic Preservation Act was passed. This provided state preservation offices and the Trust with matching federal grants while legitimizing preservation as a public, as well as private, responsibility. Under this act, the Secretary of the Interior was instructed to establish the National Register of Historic Places, to protect them from untoward destruction or alteration. The National Register now lists more than 50,000 buildings, monuments and historic sites, including more than 1000 island structures, over 800 of them in the town alone.

The movement reached legal agewhen the constitutionality of preservation laws was upheld in a landmark 1978 Supreme Court decision. In a dispute between the city and the railroad company over air rights above Grand Central Station, a Beaux Arts masterpiece, the Court upheld New York's right to refuse Penn Central permission to build a skyscraper above the terminal. The decision, effectively, validated the worth of a building's intrinsic history, setting the national stage for widespread landmark salvaging.

The Language of Preservation

Contrary to frequent local misconception, the Historic District Commission, a regulating agency for local building procedures, does not operate in a void. Its policy is taken directly from standards set by the National Trust, the nation's privately run preservation standard-bearer, and by the Department of the Interior, the public side of the national preservation coin. From these two sources come the island's policy and procedures directives. Central to the successful employment of these standards, however, is language.

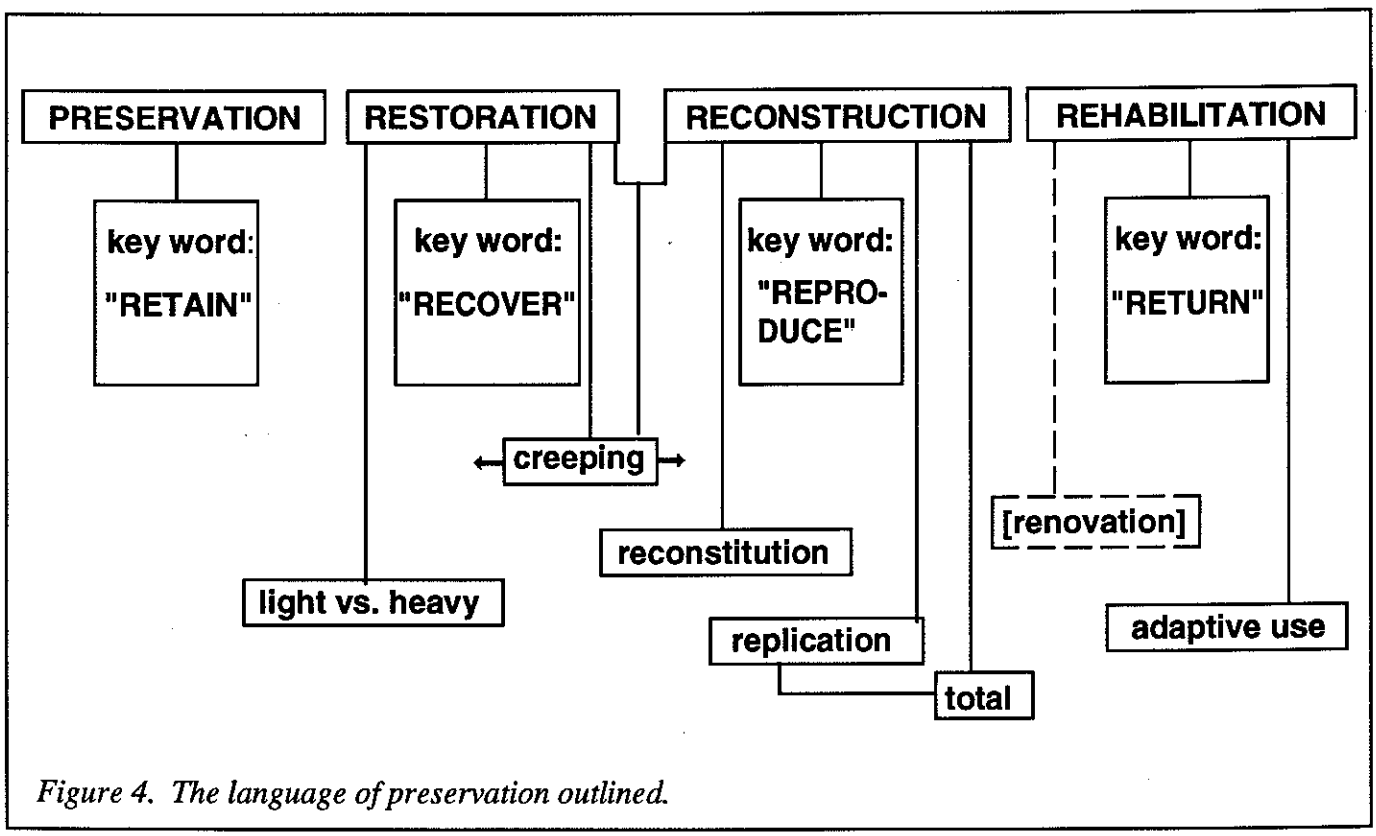

Figure 4. The language of preservation outlined.

Often those involved—bureaucrats, professional preservationists, developers, builders and laymen— will employ different terms to mean the same thing or the same term, meaning entirely different processes. Conformity of definition, then, becomes of paramount importance. To that end, the Commission employs the four basic categories of preservation work and their definitions as set out by the secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior. Those four broad areas are: preservation, restoration, reconstruction and rehabilitation (fig. 4).

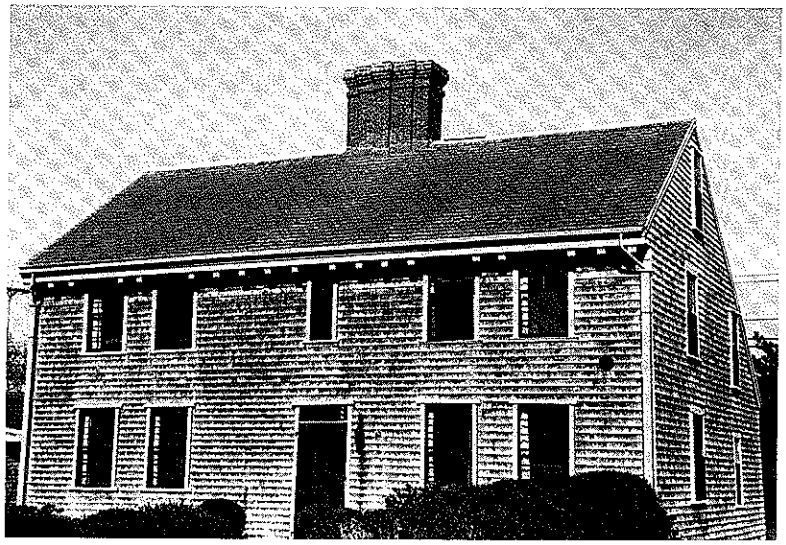

Figure 5. Major Josiah Coffin House, corner of N. Liberty and Cliff Roads.

Preservation

Preservation is defined as "the act or process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity and material of a building or structure, and the existing form and vegetative cover of a site. It may include initial stabilization work, where necessary, as well as ongoing maintenance of the historic building materials."

The key word in preservation is *retain*—that is, sustaining, maintaining and retaining the character-defining properties. Preservation, then, is the most stringent and most historically accurate work that can be done on a given building or landmark. Examples of preservation abound on Nantucket, most notably in the properties maintained by the Nantucket Historical Association—the Old Mill, the Hadwen House and the Macy House on Liberty Street, to name but a few. Excellent examples of private preservation on Nantucket include: 8 Pine Street, 105 Main Street, the Elihu Coleman House and the Major Josiah Coffin House (fig.5).

Restoration

Restoration is defined as "the act or process of accurately recovering the form and details of a property and its setting as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of later work or by the replacement of missing earlier work."

The key word in restoration is *recover*. Restoration has various stages, from light to heavy. What, and how much, needs to be replaced or removed owing to damage or the application of inappropriate additions or details determines where in the light-to-heavy spectrum the restoration falls. 'Creeping reconstruction,' however, is the introduction of so much new material as to make an old building look new.

The Jethro Coffin (or Oldest) House (1686) is a case in point. Badly damaged when it was struck by lightning in October, 1987, this venerable structure was lovingly and faithfully rebuilt over the next two years. But, in addition to modern structural aids, admirably hidden, to bolster up the old house, a new roof, new diamond-paned lead glass window panes, exterior walls and wall covering were required to bring the building back to a semblance of its former self. The chimney, while rebuilt from original bricks, bears the unmistakable stamp of 20th century masonry. While historically accurate, the *patina* created in timeworn buildings by the effects of weather, aging, and the irregularities of antiquated building practices was not recover-

able. In spite of great integrity of effort, therefore, the Oldest House approaches creeping reconstruction. The new materials required to restore it make it more a model of what was than an actual sample of a by-gone era.

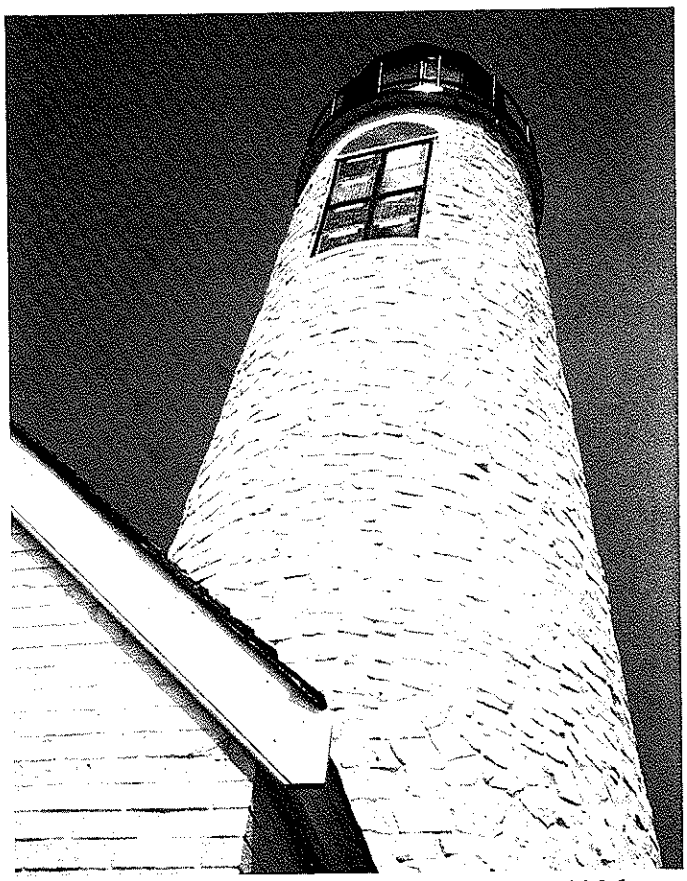

Figure 6. Great Point Lighthouse after its 1986 reconstruction.

Creeping reconstruction is the cross-over point between restoration and reconstruction, so defined when what is replaced outweighs what remains of the original. Examples of this are 14 Pine Street and 8 Ash Street.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction is defined as "the act or process of reproducing by new construction the exact form and detail of a vanished building, structure, or object, or a part thereof, as it appeared in a specific period of time."

The key word in reconstruction is *reproduce*. Total reconstruction is a full-scale modern-day reproduction of a structure that once, but no longer, exists. An ideal example of total reconstruction on Nantucket is the rebuilding of Great Point Lighthouse (fig. 6), leveled in a March, 1984, storm, after erosion had eked away its land base. Faithfully rebuilt as a monument to maritime days of yore, it was erected at a near-by but more stable site in order to provide the new structure with as much protection against a similar fate as possible.

Also key to reconstruction is a commitment to historic truth over personal taste. Reconstruction implies new construction of a building or structure on its original site, the building itself having been lost. Two terms that are often applied as sub-groups of reconstruction are *reconstitution* and *replication*. The term reconstitution applies when fragments are used in the approximation of an old, lost structure, either in its original location or elsewhere. Replication means the duplication of a lost building or structure in a location other than its original setting.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is defined as "the act or process of returning a property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions or features of the property which are significant to its historical, architectural and cultural values."

The key word in rehabilitation is *return*—specifically, the return of a given building to usefulness, however different from its original use. Rehabilitation is synonymous with yet another term bandied about by preservationists—renovation. Since both are contingent upon a return to utility through repair, the term rehabilitation will be used here exclusively, in accordance with the definitions set out by

the Department of the Interior. Central to the success of rehabilitation projects is a respect for a building's historicity—its associations with a vibrant, by-gone past. Adapting an old building to modern needs—*adaptive use*—is a frequent practice and one encouraged when integrity and historicity remain paramount. This way, an old building can continue to contribute to the community as well as to the overall fabric of the island's rich heritage.

Examples of this process abound on Nantucket—the conversion of Academy Hill (fig. 7) from a school to affordable housing or the conversion of the Thomas Macy Warehouse on Straight Wharf, first, to an art gallery, and then to a museum of local history, being just two obvious ones. In both cases, architectural integrity was preserved with a clear eye to each building's position in the continuum of island history.

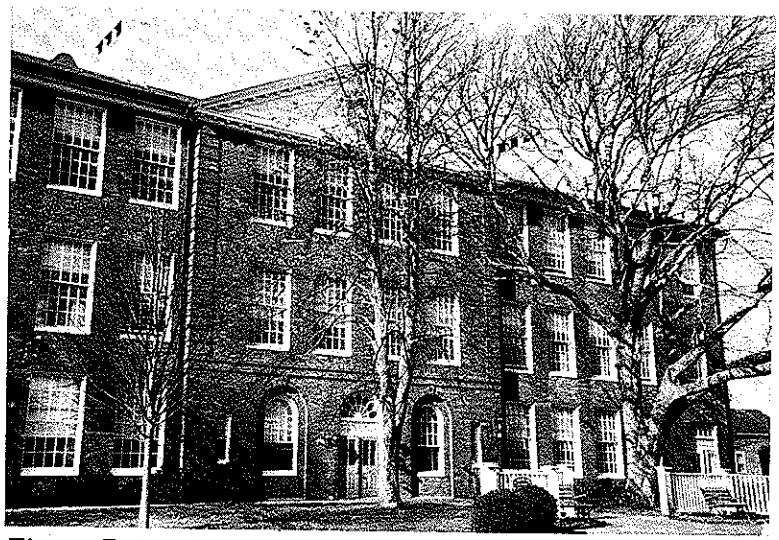

Figure 7. Academy Hill Apartments was originally an elementary school.

Perhaps the largest, most sweeping and controversial act of rehabilitation was undertaken in the mid-60s by Walter Beinecke's foresighted Sherburne Associates. The privately owned Nantucket waterfront had been allowed to fall into a state of chronic disrepair. As early as the late 1940s Lawrence Miller, then owner of Straight Wharf, offered to sell it to the town for one dollar. Citizens voted it down at Town Meeting, however, because the price tag for rehabilitating it would have been at the million dollar mark—a staggering amount of money for the times and for the indigent local economy, and a clear indicator of just how far gone the wharfs were even then.

Straight Wharf

In 1963, Sherburne Associates purchased Straight, Old South and Commercial Wharfs, a collection of broken down docking remains, old and rotting pilings, and some ramshackle buildings—all the last vestiges of a romantic era, to be sure. Straight Wharf was built in the early 1700s, Old South between 1760-62 to accommodate the burgeoning whaling business and Commercial between 1800-20. All that remains today of the old waterfront is Old South Wharf's grain elevator and the shanties on the western end of the north row of low shacks, rehabilitated themselves, and all dating from the early 20th century only.

The marinas and structures built by Sherburne Associates to replace the old wharfs bear little or no accurate resemblance to what had gone before—*except* insofar as wharfs were constructed where wharfs had once been, and then significantly expanded (figs. 8, 9 & 10). Sherburne increased the wharf area by more than 100 percent.

Even now, Sherburne's decisions

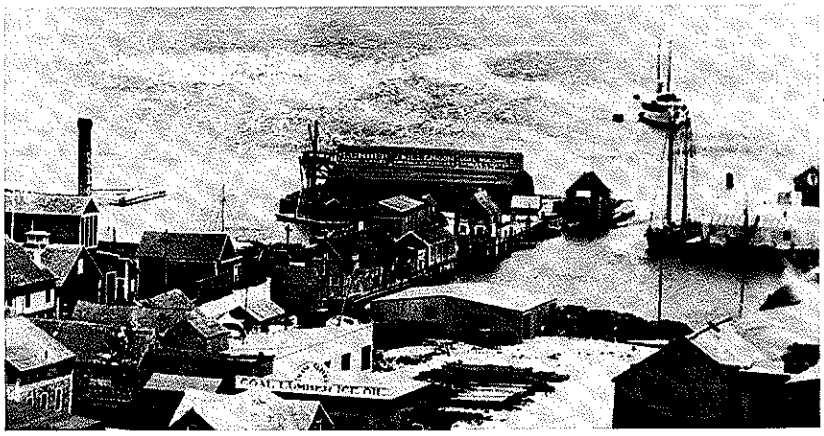

Figure 8. Straight Wharf as it looked before its mid-60s rehabilitation.

for the waterfront remain a subject of much debate. Between 1963-1970, crucial years for the waterfront, the wharfs were outside the original Old Historic District and, hence, not subject to Commission supervision. Did Sherburne preserve *all* of "those portions or features of the property which are significant to its historical, architectural and cultural values" or not?

Whatever one's opinion, the fact remains that two undeniable and significant accomplishments were the fruit of Sherburne's vision. First, it achieved a classic example of adaptive use: the return of a given "property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use." Secondly, in so doing, it singlehandedly turned the island's economy around. Sherburne built its marinas to lure yachtsmen and boaters to Nantucket. Not only was the waterfront functional again, the marinas gave the harbor an aesthetic dimension it had been lacking, making the approach to the island by ferry or private boat aesthetically pleasing for the first time in nearly a century. The net result of the waterfront's rehabilitation was to bolster the island's principal source of revenue— tourism.

'Certified Rehabilitation'

Because there is such a wide spectrum of rehabilitation, the *Standards for Rehabilitation* developed by the Secretary of the Interior allow for what is known as a 'certified rehabilitation'. This certification is given only to income-producing properties where the rehabilitation conforms to the highest possible standards of preservation. While compatible use is a necessary element, so, too, are repairing rather than replacing distinctive features when possible, keeping the character-defining properties of the original, and making minimal alterations. Only when these criteria and others are met will the Department of the Interior approve it, qualifying it for the federal tax incentives.

Figure 9. Straight Wharf and Old South Wharf as they look today.

Demolition

The last and final insult any structure must endure is demolition. On Nantucket, where historic architecture is not just the stuff of museums but of day-to-day life, its protection goes beyond merely preserving a sense of place and enters the realm of public trust. The community takes responsibility for its architectural heritage through the commissioners of the HDC and is rewarded by the right to enjoy the individual as well as collective structural richness that defines the town along with the smaller settlements and

much of what lies beyond their boundaries.

Private vs. Public Interest

Tearing down a building, then, is not a casual affair on Nantucket. Rather, it is an option of last resort, and one for which approval is an often arduous process. What might, to an owner, appear to be a purely private matter grows in possible ramifications on Nantucket: Plucking out a single building may cut a noticeable—and irretrievable—hole in the historic fabric of the island's architecture.

The Commission, then, requires that all reasonable alternatives be explored prior to issuing a Certificate of Appropriateness approving demolition. Rather than act in haste, the Commission takes the position that a time period for consideration is worthwhile to avoid the unnecessary razing of architecturally, historically or culturally significant buildings. Also, this 'stay of execution' provides a process through which the right of the public to continue to enjoy a building can be weighed against the right of the owner to determine the fate of his own property. Before permission to demolish a building will be granted, a public hearing on the plan will be held in not less than 60 days after the Commission receives the completed application.

'Stay of Execution'

Protected

A *protected structure*—one determined by the Commission as being in the public interest to preserve or rehabilitate—will not be approved for demolition unless one of two standards is met: 1) the structure is not a significant one or 2) the structure is a protected structure by virtue of its presence in the historic district but is non-contributing to the district. These two standards for approval will also require additional documentation or evidence, as the Commission thinks necessary, to substantiate a claim for destroying a building. (See Appendix C.)

Significant

A *significant structure* is defined as any building on the island 50 years old or older which is either: 1) associated with one or more historic figures or events, or with broad island architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history; or 2) is historically or architecturally significant either by itself or in context with other buildings, in terms of period, style, method of building construction or association with a noted architect or builder.

Non-contributing

A *non-contributing* structure is defined as a building which is not an intrusion but does not add to a historic district's sense of time, place and historic development. A structure deemed an *intrusion* is so because it lacks compatibility with its surrounding buildings in the historic district, detracting rather than adding or merely conforming to the scene of which it is a part.

Contributing

Contributing structures, ones judged to add to the historic district's sense of time, place and historic development, and their more esteemed cousins—buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places or those that may be candidates for this status—are the most carefully protected designations. In the case of either of these, no building so deemed *or any portion thereof* will be approved for destruction unless it is judged to be a public hazard,

Figure 10. View across boat slips in the modern-day marina.

in which case the building inspector or court must sign the order for demolition. Even then, all reasonable measures to save rather than raze will be the preferred course of action.

Documentation

In addition, the Commission may order the owners of structures involved in procedures for demolition to take the necessary measures to prevent further deterioration or destruction while the process for consideration is ongoing. Owners may also be required to provide the following: 1) black and white photos of the entire structure, showing all elevations; 2) documentation, if available, of the date of construction; and, 3) measured, as-built drawings.

Notices

A notice provided by the Commission must also be posted on any structure for which approval for demolition is sought. The notice must read: "This Protected Structure has been proposed to be demolished by its owner. For further information, contact the office of the Historic District Commission, Town of Nantucket". Additionally, notification of all property owners within 500 feet of a given structure may be required by the Commission. Other individuals who have registered their interest in preservation will also be notified. (For the Commission's policy on Demolition, see Appendix C).

Handicapped Access

Increasing sensitivity to the needs of handicapped citizens has produced state as well as federal legislation to facilitate accessibility to public buildings. The implementation of these codes on Nantucket is complicated by its wealth of historic buildings which are themselves protected by legislation from undue alteration. Striking the balance is the challenge here, and is aided by the cooperation of the Commission and the Commission on Disabilities. Together they interpret and apply the regulations to the best advantages of both concerns.

'High Access, Low Impact'

The Massachusetts Historical Commission has been wrestling with this dilemma since the late 1960s, long before legislation was even considered at either the state or local levels, owing to the vast number of old and valued structures under its auspices. Its guidelines expressly state: "The goal of providing accessibility to historic buildings is to provide the highest level of access with the lowest level of impact to the historic structure". To serve disabled citizens *and* preserve the architectural integrity of historic buildings, then, is often to seek parity between disparate goals.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of July, 1990, legislated that owners of historic buildings must make public spaces accessible to those with physical handicaps whenever this is "readily achievable" without damaging the structure's historic character. Buildings listed, or eligible to be listed, on the National Register of Historic Places are to be judged by a "lesser standard" than non-historic structures. The Massachusetts Architectural Barriers Board (ABB)'s Rules and Regulations have been fully enforced since 1987 on Nantucket through local building code compliance which defines how and which buildings must conform.

Because of the complexity of applying state and federal handicapped access codes to historic buildings, it is important to take access into consideration early in the design process. To delay or ignore the need to apply these rules will only result in wasted time, additional expense and the potential

for policy and regulation conflict down the road.

In addition to the Commission and local ABB's willingness to provide guidance on matters of handicapped access, the Commission's Nantucket Island Architectural and Cultural Resources Survey is an excellent preliminary source of information as it catalogues the specific historic characteristics of most of the island's buildings. This can be an aid in determining the most "readily achievable" means to adapt a given structure to the needs of the handicapped.

Exterior Treatment Generally, stationary solutions are preferable to mechanical lifts. These latter require maintenance, surveillance and often are aesthetically intrusive in areas of high visibility. If the main facade of a historic structure is not appropriate for alteration, another entrance at the rear or side of the building may be designated to permit handicapped access, such as exists at the Jared Coffin House or at 21 Federal Street. If at the rear, the area is to be well-lighted and maintained.

Placement

Ramps should be incorporated into the overall design and, when possible, integrated directly into the structure of a building. In lieu of a ramp, a brick sidewalk at a grade change of 1/20 combined with appropriate landscaping, as exists in the Maria Mitchell Association garden on Vestal Street, is aesthetically pleasing. This alternative does take considerable space but it eliminates the need for handrails and their unnatural intrusion on the scene.

Ramps

Traditional Nantucket fence types are recommended for handicapped railings whenever possible. These include vertical balusters with capped posts at 4-6 inches on center. A horizontal handrail is required and may be installed at a height of 19 inches, inside the rail. In some cases, a more contemporary treatment may be appropriate and will be considered on individual merit. (In the case of the Atheneum an interior lift was installed to meet standards.)

Handrails

Variances Only when the adaptation of handicapped access requirements results in significant detriment to a historic building will the owner be granted a variance from the ABB. The following factors are those taken under consideration when a variance is sought: the size of the property; its designation for public or private use; its historic significance; and the increase in accessibility as it relates directly to the cost of the adaptations. The Commission's advisory opinions concerning the interpretation or applicability of the ABB's rules and regulations adhere to strict procedural form.

Nantucket is, indeed, an architectural wonder, not just because examples of structures spanning more than three centuries exist here, although that is of considerable merit in its own right. Rather, it is this feature in combination with the fact the island is a viable, evolving community, deeply rooted in historic places and events that contributes to Nantucket's uniqueness. For the town to set standards and regulate aesthetic as well as health and safety issues reflects its informed mandate to protect and preserve through enlightened stewardship.

Partaking of Nantucket by living and building here is a privilege few enjoy. The rewards are too numerous to name, but not least among them is the fact that no area designated a historic district has ever depreciated in value. Each and every builder's or buyer's responsibility lies in compliance through appreciation, the basis of this very book.

Main Street's historic 'Three Bricks'.

India Street—north side—near Gardner Street

No. 45 Rescomb Taber
Capt. Joy

No. 43 Melatiah Nye
Carroll

No. 41 Andrew Bunker